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Book Review: Daniel Sulmasy, *A Balm for Gilead: Spirituality and the Healing Arts*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2006

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Book Review – Glenn Morrison, *The Heythrop Journal* 51:3 (May, 2010), 501.

A Balm for Gilead: Spirituality and the Healing Arts. By Daniel Sulmasy. Pp. xvii, 160, Georgetown University Press, 2006.

In the tradition of Christian Spirituality, Daniel Sulmasy's *A Balm for Gilead: Spirituality and the Healing Arts* reads as a personal witness and exploration of Christian faith. Forwarding biblical, moral, spiritual, pastoral, theological, philosophical and Franciscan perspectives, we discover a quest to journey into the heart of health care professionals to awaken a sense of spirituality and transcendence. Given the empirical, scientific approach of the medical professional, this is not an easy task. None the less, Sulmasy, through a series of meditative chapters, sets out to develop a rational and inspirational way to speak about God, prayer and the mystery of personhood.

Sulmasy is a medical doctor, professor and Franciscan friar. Drawing on from his theological and medical studies and expertise, he proclaims, like a twenty-first century Christian prophet, the core identity of healing as compassion. Moreover, he seems to follow the lead of previous like-minded prophets, namely St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a son of St. Francis, it is not surprising that he devotes one chapter, 'The Blood of Christ', towards a Franciscan construction of compassion and spirituality. Following the literary style of Thomas Merton, Sulmasy imaginatively spends another chapter creating a letter to a young intern.

Paralleling Henri Nouwen's gift of storytelling with a personal, pastoral and spiritual approach, we find, for example, our author recounting the story of Hermann the Cripple, an eleventh century Monk, hideously deformed, who, having found shelter and a life in the

monastery of Reichenau, becomes a great scholar, composer and a person whom everybody loved. The recounting of this story certainly instils both pathos and hope. Finally, there is an interesting autobiographical fragment that Sulmasy leaves at the end of his preface. In a fashion that perhaps coincidentally follows the experience of Bonhoeffer's nourishment of faith in a Harlem Church Community, Sulmasy recalls the good faith of the people of Harlem who have inspired and evangelised him. And again, in a spirit that seems to parallel Bonhoeffer's call to discipleship, he proclaims a living Christ where, for instance, he recounts the story of the man born blind (Jn 9:1-41), in the hope that health care professionals might be transformed by Jesus and initiated into his ministry of healing.

Sulmasy sets out to inspire rather than instruct. However, his method of meditative writing does become quite apologetical to uncover the importance of Christian spirituality as part of the innermost fabric of the medical vocation of healing. As a result, he will alert us to the significance of right relationships, encountering God and witnessing to Christ in an onto-theological fashion of thematisations, proofs and explanations. Consequently and understandably, as he hopes to portray a Catholic Christian understanding of healing for medical professionals, Sulmasy takes on the countenance of an angry angel. Moreover, he will lament and confess how health professions fall into the temptation to deny feelings, bear a hardened heart and become mute towards the promotion of abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, the trade of organs and the commodification of health care.

Accordingly, Sulmasy diagnoses the medical profession by way of putting its conscience into question, and in response, prescribes a Catholic habitus of faith. In the horizon of the Gospels, the Catholic tradition and the ministry of healing, he has initiated a dialogue of hope that people in health care can find value in spirituality and, possibly, develop a healthy sense

of the sacred. *A Balm for Gilead* is an excellent introduction for health care professionals and also for people of faith searching to understand the significance and contribution of Christian wisdom. Furthermore, this is a useful background book for those teaching theology and spirituality to medical students.